

# I think I'm alone now: abandoned women in epic

Helen Lovatt

Of the various recurring types of character in ancient literature, few have the pathos and emotional power to match the abandoned heroine. Here Helen Lovatt takes a look at how Apollonius, Catullus, and Virgil handle the subject.

In this hyper-connected world, are we ever really alone? Phones, computers, CCTV: someone is watching; we are always communicating. Or does that hyper-connectedness make us feel all the more alone, as we watch others plan their parties on Facebook? What does it mean to be alone? People go out of their way to find solitude: on peaks of mountains, islands, countries far away. Yet nowadays we are never very far from a method of communication.

Solitude is one thing – a state that can be a form of suffering or of pleasant contemplative detachment. Loneliness is another; abandonment something different again, an enforced state of solitude which – presuming the abandoned party is unwilling – is a sort of violence. Classical literature contains its share of abandoned men, like the castaway Philoctetes, but the abandoned woman is a particularly powerful figure, and one which recurs in various guises in different genres and periods. Many readers will be familiar with Dido, one of the most famous. Apollonius' Medea (along with her counterpart Hypsipyle) and Catullus' Ariadne are also famous for being abandoned. But what does it mean to be abandoned? In what senses are they alone, and why do they react so differently?

## Medea in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

The idea of the abandoned woman as a recurring literary figure or 'trope' can be found in Apollonius' epic *Argonautica* from the third century B.C., where the epic's hero, Jason, uses the example of Ariadne as a role model for the young Medea, when he persuades her to help him gain the golden fleece. Jason tells Medea that she, too, could be famous:

*'the very immortals loved her, and as her sign in the middle of the sky a crown of stars, which men call "Ariadne's crown", revolves all night long among the heavenly*

*constellations. Thus will the gods show gratitude to you also, if you save so great an expedition of heroic men' (3.1001–6)*

This is the praise which lights up Medea's love: 'the thrill of his need for her' and the mutual fire which flashes between their eyes make her desire to give her whole being to him. But we, the readers, know that Theseus abandoned Ariadne, and that Bacchus came to her rescue; only then was she granted the immortality of being turned into a star. Indeed, Ariadne was something of a pattern for the abandoned woman, appearing later in Latin epic such as Catullus' miniature epic poem (64): here she wakes up on a beach, expecting to see Theseus next to her, and instead sees his ship receding into the distance. She is most literally alone: on an island, apparently uninhabited, a castaway, a disposable woman.

So Ariadne was a model for Medea in more ways than Jason intended, and readers of Apollonius are likely to have perceived this irony. Medea, too, leaves her home and family for a man, ends up on her own on a foreign ship and has no one to help her but herself, setting the stage for Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. In the *Argonautica* Apollonius constructs her back story. We see her swing between the two extremes: frightened young girl, terrifying witch; passive object, powerful hero in her own right (she defeats Talos using only the power of her gaze); Nausicaa as well as Calypso. Inevitably we look forward to the moment in Euripides' *Medea* when, rejected by Jason for the greater prestige and advantage of marrying the king of Corinth's daughter, she will become a monstrous and murderous figure.

Medea, hearing Jason's attempt to inspire her with Ariadne's story, goes on to deny that she is like Ariadne:

*Aietes [the King of Colchis, Medea's father] is not as you describe Minos, Pasiphae's*

*husband [and Ariadne's father], nor am I the equal of Ariadne.*

On the surface this seems self-deprecating; but her father Aietes is more ruthless and threatening than Ariadne's father Minos, and Medea too will prove much less passive than Ariadne.

Already in book 4 of Apollonius' epic, Medea is almost abandoned: the Argonauts persuade Jason that he should offer her back to her brother Absyrtus when he catches them in a trap. After all, Aietes never promised them Medea; he only promised them the fleece. This is when we see Apollonius' Medea begin to show her full potential: she will not allow them to dispose of her; she takes Jason aside and works her own persuasive magic. She comes up with a plan that results in the death of her own brother at Jason's hands. She moves swiftly from frightened young girl to heroic, potentially terrifying witch-in-waiting. Is she being used, or does she use the Argonauts to escape from Colchis?

The abandoned woman suffers; she is the object of our pity. But she also has the power to terrify; like a Fury, she demands, and achieves, vengeance. Catullus' Ariadne curses Theseus (64.200–1) that he will be as unmindful about other crucial things as he was about her: when he forgets to change the sails of his ship from black to bright, signalling the success of his quest, his watching father throws himself off a cliff. The gaze of the abandoned woman, watching the man disappear into the distance, is also a threatening and powerful gaze.

## Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*

Unlike Ariadne, Dido is not literally alone. Rather, she suffers from an emotional solitude: she is surrounded by her own city (Carthage) and subjects, her solicitous sister Anna, her home and family. But she feels the same sense of shame and isolation. Just as Medea and Ariadne cannot return to their homes and families, because they have betrayed them, Dido feels she has betrayed her own integrity, her city, and her dead husband Sychaeus by consorting with her Trojan guest, Aeneas. All three are alienated from their

own past decisions. Medea and Ariadne made obvious sacrifices in order to fulfil the heroic missions of their beloveds. Dido has figuratively abandoned Carthage, by weakening her authority and independence, her self-reliance, and laying herself open to the hostility of those such as Iarbas who consider her relationship with Aeneas a betrayal. She had refused marriage with the North African chieftains: and in some versions of the myth (such as that told by Virgil's contemporary Pompeius Trogus), she commits suicide only to avoid this marriage, without any involvement from Aeneas. When men abandon women, leave them as if they are worthless, these women blame themselves and their own choices.

### Hypsipyle in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

Medea is not the first woman that Jason has left. Earlier in the story Jason spends an interlude on the isle of Lemnos, on which the women have massacred all the menfolk, while the Argonauts help to repopulate it, apparently falling in love with their queen Hypsipyle. When he leaves, Hypsipyle reacts differently to Dido or Ariadne: when Jason leaves, she is not yet sure whether she's a wife watching her husband go off to war, or a woman abandoned by a transient lover. She is queen of the Lemnian women and surrounded by her co-conspirators. Her decision to take in the Argonauts is made in cooperation with her nurse Polyxo and the other Lemnian women in a council. They draw strength from a bond of shared guilt: all joined together to kill their male relatives. So Hypsipyle is not really alone when she (more or less cheerfully) sends off Jason. Neither does she really carry the weight of responsibility that Dido carries: she has been made queen because her father was king; she has not led her people away from an oppressive tyrant, or founded her own city. And in fact, it will turn out that she is more alone than we think: not because Jason, inevitably, won't come back, but because she alone of the island's women did not kill her father and when the other women find out she will be exiled to Nemea (to form the subject of Euripides' fragmentary *Hypsipyle*).

### The abandoned woman

The idea of the woman alone, and her lament, draws us in, makes us look for psychological realism. But the abandoned woman is also a literary trope: each time, she says the same things. Look at the way she repeats herself: you just can't stop her going on and on. Dido calls Aeneas the child of rocks or a tigress (*Aeneid* 4.365–7); these words (more or less) come from Ariadne (Catullus 64.154–7), calling

Theseus the offspring of lioness, sea, rock, or sea-monster; Catullus himself had already used this idea in poem 60. Further back still, Jason used it of Medea, calling her a lioness (Euripides' *Medea* 1342–3), when he realized that she had killed his children. Here, too, she is heroic: before this, Patroclus used it of Achilles, when he heartlessly refused to help the struggling Greeks (*Iliad* 16.33–5). In another thread, Dido, with almost her last breath, wishes the Trojan ships had never touched her shores (*Aeneid* 4.657–8); Ariadne makes the same wish (Catullus 64.171–2); this is, more or less, the first line of Euripides' *Medea*, wished by the nurse on behalf of Medea herself. Apollonius' Medea, in her passionate speech to Jason in book 4, wonders where his honeyed promises are now (*Argonautica* 4.358–9); Ariadne, too, talks of sweet (or flattering) promises (Catullus 64.139).

Their curses, too, echo each other: at *Argonautica* 4.385–7 Apollonius' Medea promises that Jason will be pursued by her furies and suffer the same exile as her; Ariadne threatens Theseus with a mirror image of her own sorrows (Catullus 64.200–1); Dido, in the most powerful curse of all, promises that her vengeful spirit will pursue Aeneas not just to his new country (4.384–7) but even down the ages. By the time Ovid gives us a miniature of Ariadne at *Metamorphoses* 8.176, her story can be encapsulated in the phrase *desertae et multa querenti* ('abandoned and complaining, a lot'). When Seneca's Medea says *Medea nunc sum* ('Now I really am going to play the role of Medea, good and proper'), she becomes a copycat killer.

In ancient epic, you're never really alone: all your previous versions have come along with you, are there to hold your hand (but who knows what their voices will tell you to do?). In ancient epic, you're never really alone: the gods are watching you, and one might drop in at any moment. Is that the sound of Bacchic revels I hear? Or even better, you might become a god yourself, and just leave.

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### Apollonius of Rhodes – *Argonautica* 3. 973–1021 (tr. Rieu)

Jason, seeing how distraught Medea was, tried to put her at her ease. 'Lady,' he said, 'I am alone. Why are you so fearful of me? ... Without you and your sister I shall never succeed in my appalling task. Grant me your aid and in the days to come I will reward your duty, repaying you as best I can from the distant land where I shall sing your praises. My comrades too when they are back in Hellas will immortalize your name ... Remember Ariadne, young Ariadne, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, who was a daughter of the Sun. She did not scruple to befriend Theseus and save him in his hour of trial; and then, when Minos had relented, she left her home and sailed away with him... You too will be thanked by the gods if you save me and all my noble friends...' Jason's homage melted Medea. Turning her eyes aside she smiled divinely and then, uplifted by his praise, she looked him in the face... with the charm she did not hesitate; she drew it out from her sweet-scented girdle and he took it in his hands with joy. She revelled in his need of her and would have poured out all her soul to him as well, so captivating was the light of love that streamed from Jason's golden head and held her gleaming eyes. Her heart was warmed and melted like the dew on roses under the morning sun.